And when the dopamine ''buzz'' wears off, meth users are left wide awake for hours on end feeling angry and depressed.

The quick fix is more meth, which can trigger a vicious cycle of addiction. Hardcore meth users, known as ''tweekers,'' sometimes go days, even weeks, without sleep.

That's when they become especially dangerous to themselves and others. Meth-driven psychosis—chiefly paranoia and hallucinations—combined with severe sleep deprivation can result in bizarre and violent behavior. James Trimble's attorney has claimed in court filings that his client was in the throes of methinduced psychosis when he killed three people in Portage County's Brimfield Township in January.

Because it is cheaper to use than crack, and because some start using it for reasons other than getting high, meth has also had a broader appeal among potential abusers.

Women, who abuse meth at about the same rate as men, often report that they began using the drug to lose weight.

Blue-collar and construction workers use methamphetamine for an energy boost to get them through long days of hard labor.

An epidemiologist recently reported that in North Carolina, hunters and fishermen are using meth to stay awake.

Gay men everywhere use meth for its ability to enhance sex. Stepped-up meth use is being blamed for dramatic recent increases in infection rates for HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases.

''There isn't a specific demographic that I associate with meth,'' said Dr. Alex Stalcup, a drug treatment specialist in San Francisco. ''It's essentially a universal drug.'' Three abusers: three different stories.

Three abusers: Three different stories.

Margaret, 27, of Summit County, felt self-conscious about her weight after giving birth to her second child. Her boyfriend coaxed her into trying meth two years ago as she did the laundry at their apartment in Mogadore.

''I remember I felt like my eyeballs were going to come out of my head, it burned so bad,'' Margaret said. ''But then, I had all of this energy. So much energy I didn't know what to do.''

She said she stayed up for five days straight, calling off work, scouring and scrubbing virtually every inch of her apartment.

''I loved to clean when I was on it,'' she said.

She did indeed lose weight. But then she lost her job, and, because of bad luck, a vengeful boyfriend and the bag of meth police found in her purse, she lost custody of her two children, too.

Margaret is now in a community-based corrections facility in Akron working to put her life back together.

''I can't believe I let this happen to me,'' she said.

Chad, a 20-year-old recovering addict, said he became instantly addicted to meth after someone gave him a few lines to snort at the Streetsboro manufacturing plant where he worked. He said many of his coworkers used meth to endure the grind of 12-hour days on the factory floor.

''That was my excuse, to get through the shift,'' Chad said.

Max, 34, of Cleveland, said he and numerous gay men he had sex with in West Side bath houses would use meth. Most preferred not to use condoms, he said, and few asked him about his HIV status. He is positive.

Max said he has been drug-free since April, when he and other members of a group calling itself the ''Gay Mafia'' were arrested in a sweeping methamphetamine bust. Federal authorities say the group sold meth brought here from Phoenix.

''Had I not gotten busted, I would still be doing it,'' Max acknowledged. ''I don't think there's anything wrong with it.''

While crack use increased rapidly, peaked in the late 1980s and then fell off as people became wary of its effects, meth use has been rising steadily.

From 1993 to 2003, the number of people seeking treatment for meth addiction jumped five-fold.

Also in 2003, 14 states reported that more people entered treatment for methamphetamine than for cocaine and heroin combined. A survey that year estimated that more than 600,000 people recently used meth, about the same number as used crack. But experts now believe that meth use has exceeded crack.

Unlike crack, methamphetamine—often referred to as ''poor man's cocaine''—has swept through rural communities across the country, including in southern Ohio.

But it has long been popular in big cities as well, especially out west, where places like San Diego, Phoenix and Portland, Ore., report high rates of meth addiction.

Police in Los Angeles say meth has become that city's No. 1 drug.

And police in other western states say methamphetamine is not only their top drug concern, it's their top crime problem as well.

Walt Myers, the recently retired police chief in Salem, Ore., said meth use drives at least 85 percent of the crime in that city. Police in Tucson, Ariz., attribute dramatic recent jumps in thefts and burglaries to a worsening methamphetamine problem.

And identity theft is emerging in many communities as a crime of choice among meth addicts.

Bob Brown of the Colorado Bureau of Criminal Investigation said his agency has investigated numerous rings of meth users producing high-quality counterfeit checks and identification cards.

''They don't sleep and they're high,'' Brown said of the meth-driven counterfeiters. ''They're staying up late at night when the rest of us are sleeping, and they're cranking this stuff out.''

Nearly 60 percent of county sheriffs said in a recent national survey that the meth epidemic is their worst drug problem—three times the number mentioning cocaine.

''It's not like the crack epidemic,'' said Richard Rawson, a drug treatment expert at UCLA. ''It's not a flare-up and flame-out. It's a gradual infestation and it stays there. That's not a very positive perspective on the future.''

The making of Summit's Mother of Meth'.

The infestation in Akron can be traced to when Debra Oviatt returned to Ohio a second time from California, bringing along her favorite recipe for home-cooked meth.

Oviatt, 52, grew up in Wadsworth but moved as a young adult to California, where she was arrested numerous times for auto theft and was sentenced twice to prison.

She returned to Ohio after being paroled in 1986 and apparently brought a meth habit with her.

Postal inspectors arrested her in 1991 after a package containing methamphetamine was mailed from California to her brother-in-law's home in Richfield. Oviatt received six months in state prison.

She fled to California three years later when one of her customers was arrested after a 3-ounce package of meth was sent to his home.

When she came back to the Akron area in 1996, Oviatt brought with her a deadly legacy: the ability to make her own meth and a willingness to pass on the recipe.

Methamphetamine is manufactured using a witch's brew of solvents and chemicals to change the molecular structure of pseudoephedrine, the active ingredient in popular over-the-counter cold remedies such as Sudafed and Actifed.

Meth labs are typically lowtech affairs. The tools of the trade—glass jars, plastic soda bottles, coffee filters and aquarium hoses—can fit inside a typical suitcase. The flammable and combustible nature of the ingredients makes the process potentially dangerous, but not difficult to learn.

''There's definitely a science in making it, but it's not rocket science,'' said Michael Fox, a drug counselor with the Community Health Center of Akron. ''With a little bit of training, anybody can make it.''

Meth cooks typically attract a small coterie of friends and addicts who gather ingredients, such as cold pills, in exchange for a share of the finished product.

When those friends and addicts learn the recipe themselves, they often form their own co-operatives, which leads to more cooking, more drugs and more addiction.

That's essentially what happened with Oviatt, authorities say. And the result was a dramatic increase in meth abuse in southern Summit County.

How many people she eventually taught to make the drug is in dispute.

Although she declined twice to be interviewed, Oviatt claimed in a letter to have taught only two. Police think it's many more.

Among her students, they say, was Oviatt's son, Christopher Shrake, who is serving a second prison sentence for meth manufacturing.

Legendary cook undaunted by charges.

It was Shrake's carelessness that led to the discovery of Summit County's first known methamphetamine lab nearly 10 years ago.

About 7:30 a.m. on May 5, 1996, the Green Fire Department got a call about a fire at a home on East Turkeyfoot Road. Shrake apparently started the fire while mishandling some of the ingredients.

The home sustained extensive damage. Firefighters' initial suspicions were confirmed when members of a Summit County drug unit arrived and revealed that they had been investigating reports of a meth lab in the home.

A Summit County grand jury indicted Oviatt and Shrake. But that didn't slow Oviatt down.

Police say that after a friend made and sold enough meth to post her bail, Oviatt set up a shifting string of labs in people's homes and in hotels along Interstate 77.

Detectives said Oviatt sometimes enlisted the help of her 6-year-old daughter to scrape methamphetamine residue from filters, telling her it was bird seed.

Oviatt initially was selective about whom she taught, sometimes sharing only a portion of the recipe in exchange for cash or meth-making ingredients, a former student said. That changed when it was clear she was headed to prison.

''Debbie wanted to teach anybody and everybody so this town would be flooded and nobody would make any money,'' the student said.

Before she could settle the charges from the Green incident, Oviatt was arrested in August 1996 at a hotel in Wadsworth.

Police, who had been called because of a fight between Shrake and his girlfriend, found methlab components in Oviatt's room.

Oviatt agreed to a plea deal on charges from both arrests. But before sentencing, she fled in February 1997 with the 6-year-old and a pregnant 16-year-old daughter.

Detectives spent five months chasing her around Ohio, West Virginia and Pennsylvania.

''She bounced from apartment house to apartment house, hotel to hotel,'' said Limbert, the retired detective. ''They would